DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 352 853 FL 800 549

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TITLE	Writing Dear Abby: An Interim Report to Teachers of Spelling.
PUB DATE	[92]
NOTE	7p.
PUB TYPE	Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Adult Literacy; *Beginning Reading; Grammar; Literacy Education; Nouns; Pronouns; *Spelling; Verbs; *Vocabulary
IDENTIFIERS	*Van Buren (Abigail)

ABSTRACT

New spellers, adults just beginning to learn to read and write, face daunting problems with English vocabulary. Teachers use varying approaches to help these students, including published lists of Words Most Frequently Used. This paper provides an inventory of words used in letters to syndicated columnist "Dear Abby" as published in a Colorado newspaper. It was assumed that those letters touch on perennial concerns such as family relations, health problems, finances, legal difficulties, social conventions, and sex. The letters sampled contained 3,000 running words; only 66 (under 8 percent) were used 10 times or more in the sample. They illustrate usages of the "little" words that teachers report being so difficult for new reader/spellers, including prepositions, conjunctions, pronouns, articles, auxiliaries. It is concluded that this word inventory is useful because it offers perspective on word frequency, draws attention to the need for visual perception, and highlights specific nouns, verbs, and adjectives that an adult may need while writing about life concerns. Examples from the inventory are listed. (LB) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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WRITING DEAR ABBY

An Interim Report to Teachers of Spelling

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"I can't spell" is a common complaint, even among educated Americans. After years of schooling, reading, and trial-and-error experience, many are still beset by uncertainties. (Which is correct: sieze or seize, resistent or resistant? Should I write affect or effect here? Would accomodate look better with a double m?)

Yet the problems of educated poor-spellers pale beside the plight of really-new spellers, adults just beginning to learn to read and write. For them, as adult-literacy providers testify, no task is tougher than learning to spell even basic words like every, because and your.

What makes the new speller's task so daunting is the massive number of words involved. How many might someone sometime need or want to spell? Estimates reach 80,000 or more. Of course some words are more likely than others to need to be spelled. But how do teachers determine probabilities and priorities?

One way is to wait until a word is actually wanted for expressing some idea. Show the student how to write it; or let the student take a stab at writing it, then show how it should have been spelled.

In addition, some teachers try to prioritize by referring to published lists of Words Most Frequently Used. It is said that -- vast as the available word-stock of English is -- the words actually in frequent use are consolingly few. Some people take this to mean that written communication mainly employs a small group of words, each of which occurs again and again along with a sprinkling of unrepeated ones. How valid are such assumptions, and how relevant might they be to helping adults learn to spell?

Such questions prompted the inventory which led to this report. It was an inventory of words used in letters to Dear Abby, as published in a Colorado newspaper (the Boulder Camera)

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in the autumn of 1991.

Reasons for using published letters are obvious. But why Dear Abby? Why not Letters to the Editor of some newspaper or magazine? Wouldn't those give a more balanced view of male and female usage? Perhaps -- though many letters to Abby today are evidently from men. (One male writer of a recently published letter described himself as "an avid reader"; another credited Abby with having provided "helpful, serious advice over the years.")

At any rate, letters to Newsweek or the Wall Street Journal would have had certain drawbacks. Contributions to such forums deal with ephemeral political or economic matters. Letters to Dear Abby touch on more perennial concerns. The letters tallied for this report relate to a wide variety of topics, many of which the newly literate adult might have occasion to write about. They shed light on vocabulary used in connection with

- family relations, child-raising, the generation gap
- communication with co-workers
- dental and other health problems
- finances, insurance, legal difficulties
- social conventions, language usage

and of course

- sex

Those topics and others were treated in the thirty letters inventoried. The letters contained 3,000 running words; 850 of those were different entries, each representing a separate learning load from the standpoint of spelling. Thus have and having, in spite of standing for the same idea, are two entries so are carry and carries. The two members of each pair look different and are governed by different spelling rules.

Of those 850 entries, only 66 (under 8%) were used ten times or more in this 3,000-word sample. Predictably, most of them were part of the structural system of the language: they were pronouns or prepositions or

conjunctions, auxiliaries, articles -- along with others that perform grammatical functions but have little semantic content (words like some, very and not).

Among the 66 words used ten or more times, the only verbs were be, get, know, need, tell and think -- in addition to forms of be and do which function both as auxiliaries and as main verbs (words like is and has).

The only nouns used at least ten times were daughter, friend, gift, people, problem, time and year. Teachers of spelling will note that daughter, friend and people are certainly among the words that call for intensive work.

Only seven words among the 850 entries were used more than 50 times. Not surprisingly, the pronoun I headed this list, with 120 occurrences among the 3,000 running words. The definite article the (113 repetitions) outranked a (96). The 107 appearances of to owe something to its doubling as both preposition and infinitive marker. The only conjunction in this most-frequently-used group is and, which appeared 93 times. The word my, with 64 occurrences, completes the list of words used more than 50 times.

The letters to Dear Abby support the belief that a small group of words can indeed be found with relative frequency in comparison to other words. Prepositions, conjunctions, auxiliaries, pronouns and articles are repeated more often than nouns, verbs and adjectives. But the "frequent" words occur less frequently than one might expect.

Here, for instance, are the conjunctions and prepositions most often repeated in the 3,000-word Dear Abby sample; the number of repetitions for each is shown.

about (13)
and (93)
as (10)
at (10)
because (11)
but (26)
for (30)
if (17)
in (43)
of (41)
on (22)
or (16)
to (107)
with (25)

Figures on pronouns, auxiliaries and other grammar-related entries show that those Most Frequent Words, too, are actually few and far between. The entry what appeared only 12 times in the 3,000 words of the letters; there occurred just 10 times; the tally showed only 11 uses of were.

On the other hand -- frequently used or not -- words like what, there and were are obviously indispensable. Getting a secure grip on spelling them is a high-priority task. It may be well to say more about such words before reporting other results of the inventory.

Teachers often remark that basic-literacy students have more trouble with "little" words than with longer ones. That comment is usually made in connection with reading. But if the "little" words cause problems in reading, the problems are compounded in spelling. Guessing from context may help with reading, but we have to choose the right letters and put them into the right order when we spell.

Most of the "little" words belong to the word-classes featured in this report thus far: prepositions, conjunctions, pronouns, articles, auxiliaries.... Such words function as the nuts and bolts of the language without standing for anything in the real world. Words like if, on and the do not label things, actions or qualities, so they lack human interest and appeal.

That is one reason why basic-literacy students find them hard to read and spell. Another reason is that such "little" words are harder to hear. Since they lack interesting semantic content, they are spoken less clearly than other words in the sentences where they occur, so the really-new speller may never have consciously heard them as words. Furthermore, even when they are heard, many of them sound different from the way they look, and the way they have to be spelled. Of sounds like "uv"; what sounds like "wut": does sounds like "duz"; for sounds like "fer". In order to master the spelling of such words, people who have long depended on their ears for communication need special training in visual perception.

Luckily there are certain "little" words that do look the way they sound (be, he, me, we, she ...) Spelling teachers often teach these together in rhyming groups, to reduce the number that must be learned by visual means alone.

There is another potentially useful result of the inventory, Beyond offering perspective on word-frequency and drawing attention to the need for visual perception. The inventory throws a spotlight on specific nouns, verbs and adjectives that an adult may need while writing about life concerns. Here are some exa .es from among the 850 entries found in the letters to Abby. Frequencies of individual examples are not significant: no noun, verb or adjective in this list was used more than nine times; most were used only once; even love occurred only twice. The examples were chosen from the inventory for listing here because they represent particular difficulties for spellers.

Family:	aunt, behavior, brother, children, daughter, dinner, divorce, husband, love, marriage, mother, parents, separated, son, widow
Other Associates & Contacts:	anniversaries, argument, assistant, boyfriend, bridal, celebration, communication, conversation, duty, friend, guest, guy, honeymoon, inconvenience, neighbor, people, supervisor
Health:	aide, allergic, appointment, dental, died, diet, doctor, healthy, injured, pregnant, physiological, psychological, temperature, weight
Legal Matters:	authorities, bail, citizen, judge, jurors, liability, lose, minor, prison, robbery, sentenced, system, thieves, trespassing, tried
Business & Finance:	allowance, allowed, average, boss, business, buy, company, deliver, employee, equipment, experience, groceries, insurance, interview, money, payments, policy, premiums, purchased, recommended, references, savings, security, unemployed

Although there were far fewer adjectives than nouns or verbs, the adjectives that did appear in letters to Abby included several that students find hard to spell. Some of those have appeared in the foregoing lists. Here are others:

addicted	confused	humiliated	popular
afraid	depressed	hungry	responsible
aggravating	embarrassed	impossible	thoughtful
angry	excellent	insignificant	young
attractive	fashionable	intelligent	
beautiful	frightening	lovely	
bizarre	gigantic	pleasant	

Such lists, derived from the inventory, suggest that letters to Dear Abby can be useful in spelling programs beyond the basic literacy level. At any level, they can offer insight into priorities, especially for teachers who feel overwhelmed by the thought of thousands of words out there waiting to be spelled.

As teachers know, it pays to deal with only a manageable number of words at a time. The spelling of each can then be thoroughly learned. Someone who has learned to spell hungry, money and conversation has a good start on the spelling of angry, honeymoon and celebration, since analogy plays so large a part in learning to spell.

The report has drawn attention to words used in writing about adult life today. But it is merely an Interim report, based on 3,000 running words. The aim has been to encourage other inventories more tallies of letters to Dear Abby, and perhaps a comparative tally of words in letters to Ann Landers. The results could help teachers decide which words their adult students ought to be learning to spell.